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UNCLAS YEREVAN 002257

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: GOAM REGISTERS JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

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1. (SBU) The Armenian Ministry of Justice registered the Jehovah's Witnesses as a legal entity on October 8. Registration confers the right for religious groups to rent meeting space, broadcast on radio and television, publish magazines and newspapers, and it gives members of the Jehovah's Witnesses clear status as conscientious objectors under the recently approved Law on Alternative Military Service.

2. (SBU) Since 1995, the Jehovah's Witnesses have sought registration from the GOAM in thirteen separate applications. Registration of the Jehovah's Witnesses affirms Armenia's commitment to the Council of Europe to "ensure that all Churches or religious communities, in particular those referred to as 'non-traditional', may practice their religion without discrimination." (Note: Armenia also agreed to adopt a law on alternative military service within three years of its accession in 2001, and to pardon conscientious objectors. End Note.)

3. (SBU) As of October 12, ten members of the Jehovah's witnesses are serving terms in prison for refusing military service on religious grounds; four more are awaiting trial. Hranush Kharatyan, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Religious Affairs, told us that the GOAM was currently working out a procedure to release conscientious objectors who were previously sentenced to prison.

EVANS